

# **POLITICAL VIDEO IN THE UNITED STATES: A STATEMENT FOR THE 1990s**

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What is politics?

It is no longer, so easy to say. In the USA the word has been degraded to the point that conversationally it signifies the vicious throat-cutting of bureaucratic intrigue, and so has come to dignify the small everyday maneuvers of base cunning. "I loved that job, nobody was in the least political."/ "I hated that job, everyone was so political."

For "politics" to shrink to the lust for power in the micro-environment of stagnant office ponds represents a sorry decline, a lurch downhill even from its redefinition as the hoopla of quadrennial presidential media circuses. In these an echo of national political debate survives, a sense that space might be open for a candidate such as Jesse Jackson to

raise genuine issues however much the media punditry, in its infinite, infinite perspicacity, might seek to drown them in a torrent of icy scorn. In the lilliputian cosmos of bureaucratic departments, however, the more intense and engaging the "politics" the less likely will the issues transcend personal spites and ascendancies—whatever the rhetoric.

In this essay I 'am using "politics" in its archaic, now almost arcane sense, to denote the clash of opinion, analysis and actions between social forces set in fundamental opposition to each other: feminists against patriarchy, Native Americans against colonization, environmentalists against energy corporations, African-Americans against institutionalized racism, workers against pay-cuts, lay-offs, medical benefit cuts, increasing debt-bondage... The list needs to be continued at length, the interconnections recognized, and the problematic deepened to questions of capital and the state (though doing so need *not*—*must* not—lure us either into the pop-eyed messianism of some grouplets on the left, or the kneejerk pro-sovietism of others). So by "politics" I particularly mean the demands, the consciousness, the activity of political *movements*, ebbing and flowing in strength, based in everyday struggles and confrontations.

Usually in the United States these movements have had a very specific focus, such as peace or civil rights, sometimes termed "single-issue" politics. In reality, many of these "single" issues, properly understood, raised profound questions about the national political economy and culture, and are only defined as detached issues at the risk of seriously misconceiving them. However, since the Socialist Party's collapse after World War I, numerous experiences right up to the problems of the "rainbow" coalitions of the 1980s testify to how difficult it is to sustain politically integrated opposition across this very large and diverse country.

To this sociological obstacle must be added the seemingly indelible legacy of "anticommunism" as a national political religion which, to this very day, can be mobilized to discountenance—in a flash—almost every radical analysis or movement. Newsreel footage of young U.S. soldiers walking *forward into* nuclear blast test-zones in the 1950s engraves as perhaps no other image can, the absolutism of U.S. anticommunism. Integrally with this anticommunism, the summons to compete with the other superpower or go under has worked almost unfailingly in favor of astronomical, sloppily evaluated military budgets, but against education, affordable health care and a healthy environment. Had it not been for the anticommunist impulse, could the state-by-state pork-barrel politics of Federal funding not have embraced constructive needs as easily as destructive ones?

The bold political moves of the Gorbachev team in the late 1980s and the sudden changes in Central Europe in 1989 began for the first time to erode the appeal of this summons, so dramatically indeed that much of the American power structure took considerable fright (1). As Soviet political analyst Georgi Arbatov once observed, a demonic USSR is as essential to business as usual in the USA as is the devil to a fundamentalist preacher...

(1) In fact the Cold War propaganda machine's definition of the world has rarely been believed all that strongly by senior foreign-policy makers themselves. The cynicism of the U.S. government's *realpolitik* was particularly in evidence in 1989 for anyone with eyes. People's judgments as to the most sickening examples will vary but the tolerance of extreme violence by "good" communists went hand in glove with the almost totalitarian exclusion of "bad" communists, and the aversion to

oppression by "bad" dictators nestled cosily with a blind eye to the atrocities of "good" ones.  
.. "bad"

massacre around Tiananmen Square was met with embarrassment rather than fire and brimstone, and the Chinese government-supported Khmer Rouges victims were reduced to "about 8 million" from the oft-cited three million and up earlier in the decade. Yet Salvadoran guerrillas and Sandinistas were demonized; to the point where a terrified couple who had witnessed the Salvadorean Army's slaughter of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter were threatened by the FBI with the nightmare of deportation back to El Salvador in the course of their interrogation, and here murderous U.S.-armed Contra troops in Nicaragua went without comment by Bush Administration parrot. General Noriega's misdeeds were suddenly blazoned everywhere, no doubt because of U.S. government anxieties about the Panama Canal; sustained repression by rulers, military or otherwise, in Guatemala, Zaire, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia and many other nations closely allied to the USA, continued unremarked.

Without "communism" can these *realpolitik* categories continue to be masked? What will be the next panic-buon?

In the USA politics most times involves the international context as well as national realities. Beyond superpower relations and their bearing' on domestic life, the United States' activity in policing the Americas since 1898 and the globe since 1945, has been no minor incidental in our political life (Korea, Cuba, Vietnam', Falasta-Israel, Iran, Nicaragua, El Salvador, etc.), ignorant of the rest of the planet as many U.S. citizens are, and convinced as are so many of them that their country is a kind of hallowed island. That "island" was created by colonization, from the first wars against Native Americans through the annexation of northern Mexico in 1848 to the seizure of Hawaii and the Philippines in the 1890s. It is sustained today by a vast international network of banks and military bases, mining corporations and agribusinesses, media megaliths and space hardware.

It follows that political communication in the USA is intensely important both for its citizens and for the planet as a whole. A politically unlettered and globally uninformed U.S. electorate is dangerously exposed, and a danger to others. If we do not exploit as intensively as possible the scope that the state and the culture provide for alternative political communication, we can the more easily be suckered into supporting aggressive foreign policies. In the nuclear and chemical weapons era these policies could quite quickly lead to the extinction of all human life, or negative domestic policies of many kinds, damaging the environment, threatening the rights of immigrants, the health care of the elderly. (An irony of living in the USA is the gigantic volume of free or cheap information lying around unexploited, such as data on transnational corporations, which could be used fruitfully by political movements in many "Third World" nations where it is virtually unavailable.)

To come to the immediate question of political video for the nineties, I would argue that there are certain issues, each one with international dimensions, which video-makers with a conscious political commitment should take as priorities—which, indeed, any video-maker today should seriously consider. In turn, my judgment will govern the selection of the videos for comment in this essay. The issues are class, racism, patriarchy and ecological ruin.

Properly defining each here and justifying its priority is beyond the scope of a short essay: I would only say that these issues are deeply interconnected, as many of the videos selected make plain.

I am defining social class not on the level of the relative trivia of status differences, but as economic power relations together with their countless ramifications. "Class" is not a living concept in our political vocabulary in the USA, but the reality it signifies most certainly expresses itself in all directions, often transmuted into spatial terms such as "Wall Street", or "Beverly Hills" or "The Loop". Racism is a term in the political vocabulary, yet continues nonetheless to be the solar plexus of the culture, the nettle of choice for White people to refuse to grasp; denials of full humanity to non-White people take endless forms and saturate the social system. Patriarchy has much of the same sinewy strength but is not so peculiarly Anglo-American, and along with ecological ruin is today given somewhat more intelligent consideration in the official public sphere than social class or racism. Together, however, these four forces confront us, and only numbed fools would set up a competition for which is most dangerous.

But they do not only confront us. They are also part of us. They are not Martian culture. *Our* culture. Us.

## What is video?

Of the numerous dimensions to political communication, the task here is to review just one, namely video. But video also needs defining.

We might as well begin by asking what if anything is the difference between video and television? As a visceral reaction, against the banality of most television programming in the USA, the term "video" has been reserved by some to denote television programs with artistic qualities.

The direct reaction by film and video artists to the consuming and omniscient worlds of commercial television and cinema is, in one sense, at the basis of all films and videotapes that reject the product which fills the cinema screen or television monitor (Hanhardt 1989: 97).

Indeed, commentator after commentator, critic after critic, talks about "television" when what they essentially mean is U.S. television (e.g. Miller 1988; Fiske 1988). Even a British writer (Armes 1988)—curiously, given that British television has historically been of a higher calibre than most—wrote a book entitled *On Video* and spent many pages of it exploring in cumbersome detail how video is to be distinguished from both film and television.

Is it really a meaningful exercise to concentrate as he does on differences in audience, and differences in patronage and contracts for the original production, as though all these created a generic difference between video and TV? All these are important elements in the situation, but in Armes' text they make up a line of argument which reproduces the seemingly interminable nausea of the "high art/low art" debate, which has been dealt some weighty critical blows by a number of video critics (e.g. Antin 1976; Gever 1985; James 1986).

James, for example, points out how many of the techniques of so-called "video art" have been borrowed by mainstream television producers, and one might also note the way many video-makers reproduce rather than critique current televisual clichés. Or as this quotation from the British magazine ZG puts it:

...certain self-consciously borderline activities have grown up which aim to work *between* "styles" and their worlds... Hybrid styles abound... these new tendencies...challenge our most deep-rooted orientations to the world whether they are in terms of art/culture, elite/popular, or male/female... (cited in Walker 1983: 87)

Despite a number of insightful remarks scattered through his text (especially on the question of sound), Armes tends to produce statements such as this:

...the video camera...is openly, transparently, both an instrument for celebrating what *is*, rather than what could be achieved by social change, and, at the same time, a machine for making life seem more pleasurable than it is. (197)

He endeavors, then, to develop an intricate essentialist specificity for TV, comparing it with photography *a la* Barthes (1977) in its tendency to "naturalize", drawing the now familiar contrast with the big screen/darkened space/specially assembled audience of cinema, noting the effect of current computerized averaging of light on foreground and background composition. In the process, however, the fluid boundaries between film, television and video are curiously posited as fixed, at least for the discerning eye and ear. This is despite the onset of advanced compatible television and high definition television—the latter now at the doors—as much for its military and remote sensing applications as for its attractiveness to the television audience which look set to explode some premature aesthetic theorizing.

As or more important than critics' definitions of *the* medium—I am now junking the video/TV distinction, and will use the terms interchangeably—is how the *audience* constitutes it. During the 1980s a younger generation of media analysts who had cut their critical teeth on trashing conventional audience research suddenly and avidly rediscovered the importance of the media audience. Their own methodology was largely qualitative and anthropological, sometimes even resembling a diary (e.g. Morley 1986), so this volte-face



did not represent a total capitulation to Nielsen.

A prolific exponent of this school is Fiske (1988), for whom the television audience is lionized as the "producer of meanings" from the television text. He writes as doughty champion of the unjustly despised mass audience:

Television is a "producerly" medium: the work of the institutional producers of its programs requires the producerly work of the viewers and has only *limited control* over that work. The reading relations of a producerly text are essentially democratic, not autocratic ones. (239 my emphasis)

The recovery of soap .operas and their audiences into cultural and political respectability, is almost complete and thoroughly welcome... (280)

Fiske never defines "limited control", and indeed one is often led by his text to think he sees the audience as hyperactive rather than as merely active, taking the televisual text by the scruff of its neck and wrenching its head off in a determination to find its own pleasures rather than the bourgeois ideologies insinuated—a kind of no-holds-barred mental wrestling from which the original "institutional" producers can only retreat in disarray, shaken and hurt by the ferocity of the encounter. The "cultural and political

respectability" in which these couch-potatoes-turned-titans are now basking is of course academic, in the sense of the academic "community"; one hopes it is sufficient reward for the obloquy under which they have so often groaned in the past, and which has held back many a guilty hand from switching on the set.

Marc Crispin Miller (1988) has argued exactly the opposite position in his essay "Big Brother Is You, Watching". Counterpointing his analysis of U.S. television—he simply says "television"—with a reading of *1984*, and drawing upon Horkheimer and Adorno's critique (1944/1987) of the destructive cultural impact of capitalist rationality, he claims that the audience is stimulated into homogeneity, into a 1984-like fear of individuality, by the codes and rituals of American TV. These he defines as typically contrasting the smooth, all-knowing, "in control", *normal* TV personality with deviants—often conservative deviants, who are however trashed for their individuality rather than their repressive postures. Longstanding U.S. examples would be Johnny Carson in relation to Archie Bunker in *All In The Family*. He writes:

TV seems to flatter the inert skepticism of its own audience, assuring them that they can do no better than stay right where they are, rolling their eyes in feeble disbelief. 'And yet such apparent flattery of our viewpoint is in fact a recurrent warning not to rise above this slack, derisive gaping... All televisual smirking is based on, and reinforces, the assumption that we who smirk together are enlightened past the point of nullity, having evolved far beyond whatever datedness we might be jeering, whether the fanatic's ardor, the prude's inhibitions, the

hick's unfashionable pants, or the snob's obsession with prestige.  
(326)

In other words, a quasi-critical, quasi-active audience is posited by the TV industry-but an audience whose criticism is molded and channeled, rather than impulsive and anarchic. The phenomenon is one of "integrated spontaneity", in the memorable phrase of Dieter Prokop (1973). A banalized, thuggish irony and coarse, know-everything skepticism—communicative styles intensively deployed both by O'Brien and the Oceanic elite of 1984 and by the Stalinist machine which was one of Orwell's targets—have been adopted by U.S. television, Miller argues, to the point where they have become the U.S. audience's internalized censors which inure us against further critical reaction to the world around us, largely mediated via television. In the end, as the title of Miller's piece proposes, Big Brother becomes Us watching TV.

Miller's analysis begins to vault in an interesting way right over the sterile 1980s debate about liberal bias in U.S. media. Beyond this, however, the importance of the clash of perceptions between him and Fiske—all of it on the left, which is still where most of the interesting debate is to be found—is that we cannot begin to make useful judgments about the politics of video in the USA without developing our own views of the audience and its definitions of television. Does U.S. television drain us of our non-consumer selves, as Miller argues, or do we make of it, as Fiske proposes, practically what we will?

The nearer we stand to Miller, the more politically urgent become alternative and radical video-making, distribution, and media education. The nearer to Fiske, perhaps only media education is politically relevant, and even that might be questioned as dotting already visible i's and crossing out already obliterated t's. In fact, for Fiske it would seem

that politically radical video is doubtfully worth the effort, given the new readings which its audiences will insistently produce of it.

Craven and dull as it may seem to hew to a center course, neither Miller's nor Fiske's absolutisms appear to capture the many-stranded realities of televisual politics and audiences. From the latter's emphasis on the audience, we may usefully avoid the TV critic's standard vice of self-projection on to the public, of arguing simply from text to effect, of dismissing the audience as moronic. From the former's dissection of the pseudo-democracy of American television, we may maintain our watchfulness against its powerful depoliticizing trend. Neither however offers us too many clues to the two key issues: what counts as politics? and what can be said about a political televisual aesthetic? The first has been commented on above; the second will occupy us now.

### **A political televisual aesthetic for the 1990s USA**

Miller is essentially concerned with the television audience in its capacity as an audience, invited to conspire in its own emasculation. The pseudo-democracy of which he speaks exists in many other realms of the land of the free: women are denied rights over their own bodies, people of color face institutional racism, gays have to fear "faggot-

bashing", toxic agents silently invade our bodies so that corporate balances will look healthy, people with AIDS are segregated and spurned, many "illegal" migrant workers live in fear on subsistence wages. As I have indicated above, "politics" for me is what happens in the movements of struggle against these forces.

It is much harder to define a constructive political televisual aesthetic. For political aesthetics cannot float in a political vacuum, valid for every place and time. Indeed one of the problems of radical political writing about aesthetics is its tendency to try to establish absolute criteria, whether of production or reception.

I emphatically do *not* share the understanding that

...video's formal project [is] the critique of the codes of broadcast tv as an intervention in the latter's ideological function (James: 88):

For one thing, even though tv critiques are fine and necessary, we should not risk having our ground defined for us by broadcast tv. Our media politics should strive to be autonomous, influenced more by political movements than by the hegemony of dominant ideology. It should be creating alternative public spheres and be organized in self-managed structures (Downing 1984; 1987; 1988; 1989).

This is why I feel obliged to attack the media theory which argues that representation constitutes us, and therefore that media art which directly confronts the canons of mass media is the key to media politics:

...the recognition that there can be no reality outside representation, since we can only know about things through the forms that articulate them... As image-makers, artists...have come to terms with the mass media's increasing authority and dominance through a variety of responses—from celebration to critique, analysis to activism, commentary to intervention (Phillips 1989: 67,57).

Such an approach goes beyond the mediatic and becomes media-centric, inflating the perfectly valid and politically informative analysis of codes and signs in mainstream media into an all-encompassing explanation of hegemony. One can see why video artists and media studies specialists might be drawn to its exaggerated claims, since these in turn seem to bolster the significance of their professional undertakings, in contrast to more traditional studies in literature and political science. The Whitney Museum exhibit volume *Image World: Art and Media Culture* in which are to be found both Phillips' essay and Hanhardt's referred to earlier, presents a brilliant visual survey of modern artistic responses to mass media. Nonetheless, media-supremacism lends itself to such speculative excess as the argument that narrative is inherently patriarchal, which may be delicious to contemplate in the airy redoubts of some Midwestern graduate school but offers little that is very chewable elsewhere. It is urgent that media politics, video politics, should not confine itself to a discourse internal to media or TV.

Furthermore, "television" is capable of critiquing itself, as witness the classic *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. Yet again, many attempts by video artists to break through the "codes" are so labored and indigestible except to a dedicated "video art" clique that it is doubtful the codes can be said to have been significantly ruptured (e.g. Tony Conrad's *Beholden To Victory* and Lee Warren's and Remo Balcells' *The Grooming Tool*). Buchloh's (1985) comments on uncomprehending audience reactions to some of the videos he reviews, serve to make a similar point.

I will begin instead from an impermissible posture: in the 1990s, in the USA, political aesthetics should primarily aim to be energized from the *movements* against class, racism, sexism and ecological ruin, and most particularly to enable the *voices* of those struggling to be heard.

My crime is obvious. Not only am I confusing message with form, but I am in danger of at best populism, at worst copying a Zhdanov or Jiang Qing, with who knows what terrible implications? (I can only say that neither of the latter culture czars was remotely interested in letting people speak for themselves.) In 1968 Raymond Williams put my point rather succinctly about the scarcity of voices: in British television, whose vice in this respect is sadly not unique:

...we see too few faces, hear too few voices, and...these faces and voices are offered as television dealing with life... Last week's programme about farming steep land was a model of interest and intelligence, with the, regular interviewers, farmers

themselves, talking to other farmers and letting the camera see the ground... The point would then be—that, serious and pleasant as these men are, we would not want them over the next seven days, looking over their cues at Vietnam, the universities, an air-crash, a strike, Rhodesia, car-sales, a prison escape, cheese imports, a philosopher, Czechoslovakia, suicides (in O'Connor 1989: 42-44).

To put it differently, in the 1990s in the United States we have the practical opportunity, not least because of the considerable underemployed reserve of talent and experience in television production, to utilize "the age of mechanical reproducibility" to communicate the *public's* expertise on political matters (in the sense of "political" defined above). Benjamin's essay (1936/1970) never specified how reproducibility could be actualized by the workers' movement, aside from pointing to Soviet film experiments which though he did not then know it were in the process of being strangled to death as he wrote. Today, outside the televisual mainstream and also in its many interstices, alternative production and reception are becoming gradually more viable.

Let me illustrate my movement aesthetics of the voice—or as Brecht put it, how "interests [have been made] interesting" (1930/1983: 171)—from a series of recent political videos.



## Illustrations

*Slaying The Dragon* (Deborah Gee and Asian Women United, 1987) attacks media portrayal of Asian women, from *Thief of Baghdad*, *Flash Gordon* and *Fu Manchu* to the present day. It is a powerful work. Not only does it do some excellent archival work illustrating the continuity of the problem from *Sayonara* and *World of Suzie Wong* to Michael Cimino's *Year of the Dragon*. Not only does it disentangle the gender strand in racist ideology, which has typically defined women of color as frolicsome havens for puritanically repressed white male lust, and men of color as unmanly (with the partial, distorted exception of Black men): Not only does it chronicle the switch from evil Chinese to evil Japanese (1937) to evil Chinese again (1949) and then to evil Vietnamese, thus illustrating the way in which current events are exploited to keep racist myths seeming fresh off the shelf. But on top of all these elements, the video constantly injects the views and experiences of Asian-American women, whether actresses, a TV newscaster or more regular folk. The video is not simply *about* but *by*: the objects of scrutiny are active as producers and speakers.

This provides important insights. Asian-American women recount quite casual conversations with Anglo males which centered around the women's presumed sexual voracity. The links with the media images are underpinned: no longer are the images abstract history. Emerald Yeh, a newscaster, describes her crunching interview with CNN:

(disappointed) "You've cut your hair [from your photo]." "I could grow it again."

"How long would it take?"

(silence)

"We're going to send you to a make-up artist to make you look more exotic."

Professor Vincent Chin emphasizes the positive impact of the African-American upsurge of the 60s on Asian-American self-awareness, underlining the key linkages between such struggles. Yet they are not glibly linked, at another point in the video an African-American film executive is cited as having been sent off to tell the producers of a film on the Japanese-American internment camps of World War 2, that the audience would need an Anglo character to identify with.

Furthermore, Asian-American voices are not presented as homogeneous, as shown by the disagreement between the speakers toward the end of the video about racially conceived humor. The "unified ethnic voice" myth—be it 'a pleasingly radical voice or an embarrassingly quiescent one, or neither—has such a grip on white thinking. It is important to counteract it.

*Slaying The Dragon* skillfully used the documentary style to speak against racist mythology. *Thailand—Not Taiwan* (Nicky Tamrong and Robert Winingham, 1987) went about the same objective by editing together a series of *vox pop*'s to see how many street passers-by could locate or differentiate these two nations. The results were extremely amusing, with only one former seaman able to do both. The U.S. educational and media systems were woundingly exposed in full frontal.

*Through Strength And Struggle* (Asian-American Resource Workshop and Helen Liu, 1988) is a low-budget video documenting a 1985 Boston strike by Chinese women, many middle-aged, against the closing of their factory. So far from being reserved, submissive worker ants in accordance with their conventional image, these older women showed tremendous toughness as they fought tenaciously and successfully to obtain their retraining rights. The visual record of these women's self-assertion is—once again—a record of the voice raised, all the more vivid because of the prevailing image of docility.

*Till The Last Stroke* (Joy Shannon, 1987) works in a different way to undermine racist myths, as well as those of gender and age. Shannon's documentary gives a voice to elderly African-American artists in Washington DC, and allows them to talk about themselves and to show or perform their poetry, painting and singing. The camera dwells with dignity on their experienced, finely lined faces, conveying not only their wealth of insight but also—by implication, never stated—the destructive and self-destructive profligacy of a culture which neurotically holds the bearers of its vital African component at bay, century after century.

Attacking racist myths does not have to be carried out by hitting the loudest drum or breaking the biggest crystal vase. Shannon's reflective portrayal is more celebration than social critique, a celebration of achievement and personal dignity wrought despite the enormous obstacles faced by the artists' generation. (Comparing those obstacles with the current hazards faced-by the present generation, is beyond my competence.)

One of the hardest sets of racist myths to rupture are those surrounding Native Americans. Alternately pushed out of sight, quite simply loathed, or romanticized as—to

the last member of the last nation—ecological seers, their cultural expressions seen as vestiges of a disputed past which it is more delicate not to dwell upon, their future as one of disappearance in order to become truly American (ex-president Reagan's view as expressed to Moscow State University students in 1988): how might video begin to fight its way out of these straitjackets?

An observation by Emelia Seubert of the Film and Media Center of the Museum of the American Indian is important to bear in mind as we consider the answer:

...for Native Americans, cultural survival is a deeply political issue. The long history of invasions against Native culture has been instrumental through government policy—generations attended boarding schools where speaking the Native languages was punished; policies of the 1950s and 1960s known as Relocation and Training served to disrupt family life and erode Indian territory by relocating large numbers from the reservations to urban centers and broke up a number of reservations. Repairing the effects of a culture thus damaged brings to culture-based media production a political dimension which does not exist for the dominant society. (Seubert 1987: 305)

Three examples will help to illustrate the points at issue. They are *Itam Hakim, Ilopiit* (Victor Masayesva Jr, 1984), *Red Dawn* (Luke Duncan, 1987) and *Kapu Ka'u/Na*

*Maka O Ka Aina* (Joan Lauder and Puhipau, in association with Ka `Ghana O Ka Lae, 1988). In all three, moreover, the question of the "video" aesthetics of time as contrasted with the fast-paced "tv" aesthetics of time, is posed quite strongly. All three videos slow the pace of viewing, of living, right down. They prompt viewers to ask if this is just boring, or reflective of a considered mode of being.

*Itam Hakim, Hopiit* presents one of the last members of the Hopi Indians' story-telling clan reviewing his own life as well as key moments in Hopi time from the myth of origins through the 1680 Pueblo revolt and down to the present. The visual imagery is stunning, enormously evocative even for a cultural outsider. The living bond between Indian cultures and their physical surroundings breathes throughout the video. Ross Macaya, the storyteller, calmly, devastatingly attacks Christianity's pretensions, stripping away in a moment the religious cant that passes for belief in the USA. Small boys giggle and chatter and accidentally knock over a hurricane lamp while he is speaking of death (the Hopi god of death is an unpredictable being). Birds skim the surface of a still lake. Wolves howl in the snowy forest. The golden fiery ball of the sun rising. Step-editing of a blizzard. A sacred eagle flies long and steady ("I caught this morning morning's minion...").

These and numerous other moments make the video deeply meditative and offer to detach Anglo viewers from our culture's frantic, driven, cocaine-computer compulsions. Is the gulf unbridgeable? Masayesva's work makes it appear much less daunting to seek to bridge it.

Luke Duncan's *Red Dawn* explores the two worlds of an Indian telephone technician who has actively maintained his Native culture. We see him splicing cable,

working high up on the pole with multi-colored strands, so many they look like capellini. We also see this same telecommunications technician, his lips wide apart, his mouth wide open, singing lustily at the head of a Native American singing group of which he has been an active member for fifteen years. He is quite explicit that his half-hour drive to and from work each day gives him time

to switch from one way of life to another... I use this half hour to cross over to the other side, the modem side... I don't ever make the mistake of trying to choose between the two. Working is more than just making a few bucks... Working gives you a sense of pride, of self-worth. But never forget that you're an Indian—that is the most important thing.

This time the voice is that of one person who has addressed the dilemmas of Native life in the USA in his own way. Leading two cultural lives is not so uncommon today in many countries, but here we have one person whom we can observe living both parts of his life to the full, not melting one into the other. The video does not pronounce on whether this should be the path for Native Americans. It simply explores what it means for one person and his family and friends.

*Na Maka O Ka Aina* is mainly musically expressed by ballad and song, reviewing the expansion beyond the continental United States into Hawaii, and its consequences for the Native population. The lyrics, which tell of the Queen of Hawaii at the time of the U.S. takeover, of the concreting over of Waikiki, of the racism of the Anglo settlers, of police confrontations with Native residents who are being pushed off their land, are

intercut with video shots of bulldozers gouging huge wounds out of the land, old newspaper photographs of the Queen, a paintbox depiction of the skyscrapers which makes them look like Hiroshima after nuclear annihilation, and extensive footage of Native singers. At one point an exquisite musical trio lament over the history since the US invasion is set against the hideously ugly concrete backdrop of Waikiki. At another, demonstrators speak before setting off in a boat to protest the Canadian Navy's use of an outlying island for gun and bomb practice. The notion of Hawaii as pure bliss if you can once afford to get there, or live there, is demolished piece by piece, with hardly a voice raised except in song. There are no snarling bass guitars, no strutting lead singers, simply the plain, delicate musical expression of loss, defeat and struggle.

Another dimension of the United States' racist present, as well as past, is found in its immigration and settlement policies. Whereas Europeans were officially declared to be almost automatically welcome under the Bush Administration in 1989, refugees from Central America and from Haiti have largely been unwelcome (except for a brief period when Nicaraguans were defined as equivalent to boat people). "Illegal" migrants often live in clandestine conditions, fearing a midnight or dawn swoop by La Migra. By definition they do not get to speak in public very much, for fear of being identified—or of having their relatives identified and repressed in their countries of origin. (Of course if the repression were that of a Communist regime, it would then become real and a matter for serious moral concern.)

Two videos in particular give a voice to migrants caught in this vise. *Voyage Of Dreams* (Collis Davis and 'Cajuste Raymond, 1984) and *Esperanza* (Sylvia Morales, 1985).

*Voyage Of Dreams* uses animation and pixelated images as well as interviews and video newsreel footage and dance to allow Haitians to speak their situation for themselves. There are images of ex-president Duvalier throwing coins from his car as it sped through the crowds, and of people scrabbling and fighting for them. There are interviews with teenagers here in the USA to pursue their education because their parents could not afford schoolbooks for them on a Haitian income. There are images of jailed Haitians in a New York prison. Speakers underline the terrible hazards of a 700 mile boat-voyage, taking twelve days, often without sufficient water, and the ten years' imprisonment which faces them if they are caught by the U.S. coastguard or police.

*Esperanza* departs from the documentary format to present a nearly hour-long narrative. Sylvia Morales' video leads us to grasp emotionally the terrifying social impotence experienced by many "undocumented" workers and their families. Set in California, we are introduced to a family of four where the father is absent throughout, working clandestinely in a city a hundred or more miles away. His' wife is bringing up their early teenage daughter and little boy. We see the mother kidnapped by the *migra* in the course of food-shopping, while her little son is momentarily inside an ice cream parlor. He comes out, and only her shopping bags remain on the sidewalk.

We sense the terror and desperation of the children, see them hiding in their apartment, terrified the police will pick them up. Later, we see them trying to find the one-way bus fare to travel to their father to let him know what is happening. In the end, they manage to raise the money with the help of a woman tortilla vendor; but while the sister is in the bus-station restroom, her brother is made nervous by a cop looking at him, makes a



run and is picked up. One of the film's most striking images is the final one of seeing the children being driven away in police cars, isolated, desperate, powerless. The video so builds the narrative that Anglo viewers have the opportunity to get right inside the experience of being picked up by La Migra. The issue becomes people whose lives speak to us, not a Mexican flood. In the media silence, a voice.

The voice, so prominent in *Esperanza*, is also at the center of *First Person Plural* (Lynn Hershman, 1987). Concentrating on her experience as a battered child, she correlates her experience as a battered child to her parents' silence about their experience of the Holocaust. The essence of what she utters is the agony of emerging from self-repression, from the conviction that she must never speak about her experiences, that she was to blame for not stopping them. "Don't talk!" is whispered repeatedly on the soundtrack as though inside a frightened child's mind. "I was too young to understand that I was being robbed of my voice", she tells us.

The film is intensely personal and courageously autobiographical: Hershman is very evidently concerned to lift the veil of silence, to urge other people who have been "robbed of their voice" to emerge from these guilty, terrifying shadows and speak their pain. She uses a number of experimental devices such as jump-cuts, flashing sequences of images, different colors to indicate her different selves, and dwells on: the popularity of the Dracula image as expressive of violence against women.

In *Of Snakes, Moons, and Frogs* (C.L.Monrose, 1988), another unspoken reality is explored, namely the role of goddesses in religious cultures of the past. I must confess to being somewhat unnerved by many aspects of religion, not least its capacity to be used

to justify obscurantism and personal ascendancies, all in the name of what the god or the goddess thinks best for you (as interpreted by the all-too-actual guru). However, Monroe's visual exploration, with the exquisite music of the Bulgarian Female Vocal Choir in the background, goes a long way to undermining my secular prejudices and no doubt, therefore, lesser ones of some other people. Only her use of character-generated word-truth on the screen seems to indicate some loss of confidence in the video's fine images which serve well to voice the ongoing power of women's cultures. Here the voice is that of women's hidden history and submerged power.

The last video I propose to review is Deep Dish's collage of work on AIDS, entitled *Angry Initiatives, Defiant Strategies*. (Along with Paper Tiger Television, Deep Dish has pioneered low-cost political video throughout the USA via public access cable channels, and acts as a satellite distribution network to over three hundred such stations, collating work done all around the nation and making it nationally available.) People with AIDS have found themselves almost insulated off from the rest of humanity, and discriminated against in areas such as jobs, housing or medical treatment. They have been told AIDS was a punishment for their gay sexuality. The disease has been defined as a "gay" disease, when in fact increasingly it is poor Latino and Black people with a history of intravenous drug use, and babies of drug-abusing mothers, who are stricken with the illness.

The collage moves at a pace, cutting through a rapid spectrum of images: a Black rap group, a still of Queen Victoria, press coverage of AIDS with some very effective zooms into the details of the text of the newspapers, a montage of radio phone-in voices, a

dramatic piece about the quarantining of gays, a demonstration outside Sloan Kettering Hospital in New York City, an image of a condom being pulled over the Reverend Jerry Falwell, interviews with mothers of AIDS patients speaking their grief at being unable to arrest its progress in their children. In the process many if not all of the illusions and stereotypes listed above are dealt with forcefully and wittily. Individuals with AIDS are able to be heard—active and protesting, rather than terribly wasted and weak.

The last work, as opposed to the last video, with which I wish to illustrate my argument about the political aesthetics of the voice, is *The Four Corners: A National Sacrifice Area?* (Christopher McLeod, Glen Switkes and Randy Hayes, 1984). Available on video from Bullfrog Films, it was nonetheless originally shot in 16mm. *Four Corners* raises a voice in protest against ecological ruin.

The four-state area of Utah, Arizona, Colorado and New Mexico contains considerable natural resources deeply coveted by energy corporations, especially in shale oil and uranium. Both in terms of the physical environment and in terms of the population, these corporate desires are dangerous. Aerial pans demonstrate the impact of strip-mining, gigantic clawmarks gouged out in the earth's surface; close-ups of children born with terrible disabilities deriving from their and their own parents' proximity to uranium filings, provide chilling testimony to the demonic uncontrolled force of the nuclear Pandora's box.

The documentary does not simply seek to terrify us, however. It gives voice to a whole variety of the actors involved, not least the Native Americans on whose land much of the coveted mineral wealth is located, and the Chicano miners who extract uranium ore.

It does not seek to simplify the issues, either. The divergence is heard between those Indian voices in favor of economic development through leasing parts of the reservations to the energy corporations, as well as those pointing to the ravage of nature and human beings which would predictably be entailed. The reluctance of the Chicano miners to oppose uranium mining; despite their sense of its immediate peril\_to their health, is also explored in terms of the failure of the economic. system to offer them comparable but safe jobs elsewhere.

These are not the only voices in the documentary. The then-governor of Colorado and a number of other protagonists are also interviewed. The film plumbs the depth of these issues and seeks to give space to a variety of voices without presenting a ready-made pat solution to the problems it highlights. It is more than a film about ecocide, for it forcefully depicts the complex linkages between social and economic relations and the environment, between "progress" and survival. Like so much in the works reviewed in this section, it suggests that the 1989 *eclat* surrounding State Department official Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" conjecture was a diversion of our attention from more significant issues; to bend slightly Horace's famous phrase,. the mountainous parturition of an absurd mouse.

## Conclusions

In brief conclusion, then, I would propose that political video in the USA at this time has enormous opportunities to allow the unheard majority to voice its understandings and perspectives out of its struggles. I have selected some outstanding and provocative examples, but there is plenty of evidence that the production talent exists in abundance. *We know* the situations do.

"Voice" need not be understood simply in its literal sense of speaking so that someone can hear, as in radio broadcasting. The voice in life and in video is embodied in visual and other aural images-of ali•kinds which can support (or detract from) its messages. The videos I have selected have very different styles, from the experimental to the conventional narrative.

Nor do I intend "voice" to- indicate any voice without further qualification: Maryknoll World Video financed the production of three video documentaries directed by Ilan Z'iv about famine in Africa. The second (*Shaping The Image, 1987*) was terrific, particularly because it allowed Africans to speak for themselves about what the famine meant; the third (*Selling The Feeling, 1987*), on the "Hands Across America" event, was inversely awful, relying heavily on boring leftist academics pontificating on camera about "the culture".

Thus the fact people in the USA now have some access to speak televisually for themselves more than ever before is not a magic potion to right all wrongs. It is, though, a new situation with considerable potential for political development'in this country. As we

celebrate the increase of democracy in the East and its costly but continuing extension in South Africa, let us be keenly aware that the video aesthetics of the voice can equally help to extend democracy's frontiers in the West: and that democracy here has in no way yet reached the fulfillment of its historical potential.

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There has never been enough discussion of the

relation between art and social change.

In 1969 we went for the money opportunistically

to implement cultural change.

Eventually we were asked to legitimate ourselves.

The artists who succeeded were the least dangerous.

The video movement had been co-opted by the state.

The video canon is so innocuous

because the field avoids questions of what art is and what it should be.

Paul Ryan